

# **SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and the law on religious freedom provide for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief, and provide for judicial protection to all religious denominations. Both the constitution and the religious freedom law grant religious groups autonomy and the right to teach their religion. Religious groups must register with the government.

In August, the government and the Holy See signed an agreement defining “the legal framework of relations” between the Catholic Church and the state, according to the Vatican.

In June, the Episcopal Conference of Angola and Sao Tome and Principe sponsored a three-day seminar on migration issues for church leaders and members. In July, Bishop Manuel Antonio dos Santos resigned for personal reasons after serving the country’s one diocese for 15 years.

In August, officials in the U.S. Embassy in Luanda, Angola, and newly accredited to Sao Tome and Principe began engaging with religious leaders and government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights on the legal framework and registration process for religious groups, and respect for religious freedom. Throughout the year, embassy local staff based in Sao Tome also met with government officials, as well as with religious leaders, to discuss the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on worship services, relations between religious denominations, and the government’s treatment of different religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 217,200 (midyear 2022). The Roman Catholic Bishop’s Office estimates approximately 54 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; previous estimates put the Catholic percentage as high as 85 percent. The last official census of religious beliefs was in 2012. In 2019 (most recent data), the Roman Catholic Bishop’s Office estimated the

population was approximately 12 percent Protestant and less than 2 percent Muslim. Protestant groups include Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Evangelic Assembly of Christ, the Universal Church of Christ, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the Tocoista Church, the Manna Church (of Portuguese origin), and others. The number of Muslims has increased over the past two decades due to migrants from Lebanon, Nigeria, Cameroon, and other African countries. Some Christians and Muslims also adhere to aspects of Indigenous beliefs.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship. It provides for equality of rights and obligations irrespective of religious belief or practice and for freedom of religious groups to teach their faith and to organize themselves and their worship activities. According to the constitution, these rights are to be interpreted in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and may be restricted only in cases envisaged in the constitution or suspended during a state of emergency or siege declared according to the terms of the constitution and law. The country's religious freedom law acknowledges and ensures religious freedom for all and judicial protection for religious denominations. According to the law, the state does not profess any religion and ensures that its relations with religious organizations are based on the separation of religion and state. The law also stresses that all religious denominations are entitled to equal treatment. There are no laws regulating hate crimes or hate speech related to religion.

Religious groups must register with the government. If a religious group does not register, it is subject to fines and possible expulsion if it is a foreign religious group. To register, a group must send a letter requesting authorization to the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights. Once the group obtains authorization, it must submit the following documents to a notary public: the ministry's approval letter; the group's statutes; the minutes or report from a meeting attended by at least 500 representatives of the group and signed by its president and secretary; copies of the national identity cards of those who attended this meeting; a list of board members; and a certificate from the

Registrar's Office attesting that no existing organization has the same name. After a payment of 1,000 dobras (\$43) for notarial fees, an announcement is published in the government gazette, and the group may then operate fully as a registered group. Once registered, a religious group does not need to register again. Registered religious groups receive the same benefits, such as tax exemptions, as registered nonprofit organizations. There is no government data available on the number of registered religious groups in the country.

Religious education is part of the official public school curriculum but is not required. There were no reports of religious classes being provided in public schools. There are two schools run by religious groups, one Catholic and one Seventh-day Adventist; both provide a general education and their religious classes are open to church members and nonmembers. The Ministry of Education provides oversight on the curricula of religious schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

During the year, the government did not receive any registration requests for new religious groups. There were no reports of religious groups' concerns about the registration process or of any government action taken against unregistered religious groups.

On August 16, the Papal Nuncio to the country and then Foreign Minister Edite Ramos da Costa Ten Jua signed an agreement between the Holy See and the government that "defines the legal framework of relations" between the Catholic Church and the state, according to a Vatican press statement. The government did not provide details about the agreement, which was pending ratification by the parliament at year's end.

In October, the Ministry of Education and the Seventh-day Adventist Church reached an agreement that allowed a public-school teacher who was a member of that church to participate in weekly teacher training sessions on a day different than Saturday, so as not to conflict with worship services. Previously, that teacher had been required to attend the regular training sessions on Saturdays.

Government COVID-19 prevention measures, which were taken in coordination with religious leaders in 2021 and included limits on church attendance, remained in place until August 1. Until that time, churches had accepted the restrictions and had followed them by decreasing the number of parishioners at the normal places of worship or directing members to hold small group religious services in homes.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In June, the Episcopal Conference of Angola and Sao Tome and Principe sponsored a three-day seminar on migration issues for clerics, lay leaders, and church members in which they discussed current trends and root causes of migration.

In July, Bishop Manuel Antonio dos Santos resigned for personal reasons, according to media reports, after serving the country's one diocese for 15 years.

In a radio interview on September 22, Father João de Ceita Nazaré, Vicar of the Diocese of Sao Tome, called on the general population, and Christians in particular, to set good examples during the September 25 legislative elections, given reports of pre-election verbal and physical altercations between members of various political parties.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. Embassy in Luanda, Angola, began overseeing U.S. relations with Sao Tome and Principe in August. Beginning that month, embassy officials met with religious leaders and government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights to encourage their long-standing tradition of respect for religious freedom. Throughout the year, locally based embassy staff in the country met with these officials as well and discussed the legal framework and registration process for religious organizations and their impact on new religious groups as well as existing registered denominations. Embassy officials also met with the vicar of the Catholic diocese, leaders of the Seventh-day Adventists, and the imam of a local mosque to discuss the impact of

COVID-19 restrictions on worship services, relations between religious denominations, and the government's treatment of different religious groups.